America's First Ladies
Captions from the Herbert Hoover Presidential Museum

Background

The role of the First Lady of the United States is both ambiguous and visible to the American public, especially with the First Ladies of the 20th century. Due to the lack of legal and constitutional precedent surrounding the responsibilities and boundaries of the First Lady, the women who have inhibited this role molded and shaped their duties based on their personality and sense of duty to the President and to the American people. Furthermore, even though the formal nature of the First Lady has often restricted them to the capacities of wife, mother, hostess, and symbol of the Presidency, many First Ladies have become social advocates for various causes, stand-ins for the President in times of emergency, and active campaign leaders in the presidential election process. Their efforts to assist their husbands, both formally and informally, has only been recognized more recently as the 20th-century version of the First Lady become more active and visible to supporters and critics (especially with First Ladies like Eleanor Roosevelt and Hillary Rodham Clinton). The women who have fulfilled the office of the First Lady throughout the history of the United States has provided a foundation and an example for future First Ladies to follow.

The initial First Ladies of the United States helped create the foundation of this duty based on their own contribution to their husbands' efforts during the American Revolution and the following creation of the new nation. The First Ladies of our country's Founding Fathers, such as Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, Elizabeth Monroe, and Louisa Adams, used their considerable popularity and exposure to privately further the new country while fulfilling their official role of hostess to the President's formal gatherings and events. For example, Abigail Adams maintained a keen interest in her husband's political agenda and actively participated in debates and discussions with Washington's new political elite, actions that sharply divided her supporters and critics. In addition, her predecessor, Martha Washington, matched her husband's sense of formality and grace through her hosting abilities in New York and Philadelphia. The First Lady provided a sense of elegance and sophistication to the office of the Presidency and to the White House, especially in the case of Dolley Madison, whose popular parties and artistic tastes set the formal standards for future First Ladies like Jacqueline Kennedy and Nancy Reagan. These early examples of the First Lady persona were not without controversy or criticism, such as Louisa Adams's status as a British subject or Elizabeth Monroe's constant

bouts with sickness and seclusion. However, these strong-willed, devout women helped create a new basis for the unofficial support to their husbands in the midst of the indecisive and difficult beginnings for the United States. Their efforts, despite the mores and standards for female behavior continued to separate the gender gap into the 19th century, helped indirectly shape the new nation and display more than the typical image of the loving, supportive wife who can host formal parties on behalf of the men in power.

As the Presidency shifted from the regal sense of the Founding Fathers to the common-man approach of men like Jackson, Polk, and Lincoln, the position of First Lady was often filled by a relative of the President. Many of these Presidents were widowers and bachelors, thus many First Ladies prior to the Civil War were nieces, daughters-in-law, and second wives of the President, such as Emily Donelson, Angelica Van Buren, and Priscilla Tyler. As this role changed with the expansion of the United States, these women often retracted their responsibilities to the tradition of hostess and moral support to the President. Despite this sense of duty and devotion, many of these First Ladies added details that became standards of tradition for future First Ladies and Presidents, such as Julia Tyler, who requested "Hail to the Chief" to be played to announce her new husband's arrival and Abigail Fillmore's creation of the White House Library. Exceptions also existed in the role of the First Lady of the early 19th century, especially in the case of Sarah Polk, who equally matched her husband's sense of work ethic and ambition. However, as the country slowly progressed to the outbreak of civil war, many historians have equated the ineffective nature of the Presidents to the lack of visibility of the First Lady. Jane Pierce's depression following the death of her son led to her refusal to occupy the White House during her husband's tenure in office and Harriet Lane's genteel nature was overshadowed by her uncle James Buchanan's failures as President and his status as a confirmed bachelor. In the midst of the evolution of the new nation, these First Ladies added minor details to their duties that later grew into traditional roles for future First Ladies of the United States.

When the Civil War started in 1861, the eyes of the war-torn nation looked towards the White House and its occupants, Abraham and Mary Lincoln. While her husband managed the tasks of Commander-in-Chief and President in our nation's most difficult time, Mary Todd Lincoln served as a visible partner and symbol for the President as social functions. Despite her tendency for melancholy and anger, her increased visibility set the standard for the First Ladies that followed her in the second half of the 19th century. Although there were First Ladies like Eliza Johnson who preferred a more modest role, the growing women's suffrage movement affected the First Ladies in post-Civil War America and the popularity of these First Ladies helped mold a new socially aware woman in the White House. Julia Grant capitalized on her war-hero husband's popularity with the American public, "Lemonade Lucy" Hayes gave weight to the emerging temperance movement with her ban of alcohol in the White House, and Grover Cleveland's second wife Frances was

described as “the most popular women in the country” due to her active campaigning for her husband’s elections. However, as the nation continued to grow into an economic world power, the exposure of the First Lady often led to these women becoming more popular than their Presidential husbands. The equal partnership image of the First Lady slowly evolved over time until the “celebrity” Presidency of Theodore Roosevelt and his wife Edith, who ushered in a new status of behind-the-scenes partner and active campaigner for the equally exuberant Teddy. The expansion of the partnership between the President and the First Lady also affected the Wilson administration during World War I, where Edith Wilson was referred to as “the first woman President” and helped manage her husband’s affairs after his stroke in 1919, a year before the passage of the 19th Amendment.

As the United States emerged as a world economic and political power following World War I, the expansion of media like film, radio, and television added increased public awareness of the Presidency and the First Ladies in the 20th century added new dimensions to their capacity as the First Lady. The common American public often knew the popular disposition of Grace Coolidge compared to her husband “Silent Cal” and Lou Henry Hoover’s work with the Girl Scouts of America matched the humanitarian efforts of her like-minded husband Herbert. However, the Great Depression created a disillusionment in the American public that required a popular President with an equally popular First Lady. Eleanor Roosevelt fit the bill as the “First Lady of the World” with her sense of social justice and activist nature. Roosevelt is credited for the current duty of social advocate for the office of the First Lady and often served as a stand-in for her husband Franklin on the campaign trail due to his workload in Washington and his affliction with polio. The First Lady role began to show a behind-the-scenes partner to her husband’s political agenda, such as the case of Bess Truman’s need for privacy while devoted to Harry. However, the Baby Boomer generation of the United States grew up on the family image of women like Mamie Eisenhower and Lady Bird Johnson who worked tirelessly for their husbands while progressing social causes for women and children in the United States. Furthermore, Jacqueline Kennedy provided a renewed prestige and elegance in the White House that had not been as visible since the days of Dolley Madison.

After the tumultuous 1960s, First Ladies provided a stability to their husbands’ administrations while advancing the need for reform in health care, education, and women’s rights. Pat Nixon matched her husband’s diplomatic efforts abroad while her successor Betty Ford was renowned for her husband’s campaign efforts and her vocal nature on feminism and personal addiction. While the office of the Presidency actively shifted during the indecisive 1970s, these women often overshadowed their husbands in terms of popularity and visibility, even after leaving office (such as the case of Rosalynn Carter and her work with Habitat for Humanity). A new age of womanhood further influenced the First Lady’s exposure with the succession of Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush,

and Hillary Rodham Clinton. The social conservatism of the Reagan administration was further promoted by Nancy's allure as a former actress and support of treating drug abuse in America, matched by the following Barbara Bush and her work with education and child literacy. The 20th-century America closed with arguably the most powerful and visible First Lady since Eleanor Roosevelt with Hillary Clinton and her increased responsibilities of supporting her husband's domestic agenda, especially with her work on universal health care. Clinton created an example to follow in the 21st century with her successors Laura Bush and Michelle Obama, both of whom are viewed as equal partners to their husbands' political efforts while undertaking social issues of health and education for children in the United States.

As historians and students continue to review the legacies of the Presidents of the United States, it is impossible to ignore the impact of the office of the First Lady, both on the respective administration and the American public. As the nation evolved over the last three centuries, the status of women also progressed in American society and the role of the First Lady shifted from traditional hostess and domestic partner to the President to the social advocate of the Presidency and the symbol of the President's private life. Many historians have concluded that the White House and its inhabitants are the closest example to European royalty in the United States and the image of the First Lady has matched that view of elegance and style with the social and personal causes that they have participated in to enrich the lives of their fellow Americans.

Exhibit Themes

1.) The First Lady is not elected and has no Constitutional duties

2.) The role of the First Lady has changed from revolutionary "mother," to hostess, to a catalyst for social change.

3.) First Ladies have served in various capacities while their husband was in office and many First Ladies went on to have very successful careers.

The First Lady and her "Official" Duties

The First Lady is not elected, and there are no constitutional duties assigned to her. The women who have filled the role of First Lady shaped their duties based on their own personalities, their personal sense of duty, and societal expectations.

The first women to occupy the role of First Lady entered the role with the understanding that monarchy was not tolerated and they were not permitted to “act like queens.” The First Ladies worked alongside the servants and hosted formal dinners. They brought a delicate balance of hard work and sophistication to the role of First Lady, but they were never formally permitted to contribute to the new country’s politics. Women were not allowed to vote and could be treated like property by their husbands.

First Ladies as Founding Mothers

Historians often cite the accomplishments of America's "Founding Fathers" without mention of America's Founding Mothers. In recent years women, such as Abigail Adams, have been pushed into the spotlight by modern authors like Cokie Roberts and Carol Berkin. Not all of America's Founding Mothers were First Ladies, but the few who were made important contributions. The women surrounding the Founding Fathers were opinionated, passionate, and proactive.

Martha Washington spent eight years by George Washington's side and claimed that she heard the opening and closing gunfire of every battle of the American Revolution. Even when she was not at the front lines of the Revolutionary War, Martha made uniforms at Mount Vernon for soldiers and talked with the townspeople about supporting the troops. In 1778 when Martha joined George at Valley Forge, war had ravaged the men, but Martha tended to the sick and injured, made clothing, and worked tirelessly to raise the spirits of the soldiers. She was one of the first people to receive the smallpox vaccination, to show the soldiers that it was safe. As First Lady, she received veterans at her home and treated them like family.

Abigail Adams famously melted her family's pewter to make bullets for the muskets of soldiers. She also maintained the family farm while her husband was away helping to found the country. Most notable, however, was Abigail Adams’s contribution to women's rights. Abigail championed education and individual rights for women. She famously wrote to her husband in 1776, "Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies, we are determined to foment a Rebelion." She wrote to her friend Mercy Warren and suggested that they petition Congress so that women could have more rights in America than they did under English rule. Mercy did not reply, so she appealed to her husband. She often wrote her husband on the benefits of educating women and women's rights. More often than not, Abigail was deferred because John did not want to publicly champion women's rights, although he believed in them and wholeheartedly accepted them for his wife.

Abigail was politically aware and had many opinions about how Congress should vote and what direction the country should take. She wrote, "if we mean to have heroes, statesmen, and philosophers, we should have learned women." Finally, John wrote back to her supportively, "Your sentiments on the importance of education in woman are exactly agreeable to my own." Although Abigail Adams never lived to see women own property or benefit from education, her letters paved the way for the advancement of women for generations to come.

From Hostess to "the First Woman President," the Changing Role of the First Lady

As the ideal electoral image for the Presidency changed from patriot to "common-man," the role of the First Lady changed as well. Many of the First Ladies leading up to the Civil War were family members of the President and assumed the role of hostess and support for the President. Mary Todd Lincoln set a new precedent for First Ladies by attending social functions regularly and accepting her role as a symbol of the Presidency.

In the post-Civil War era, First Ladies were active in social reform movements such as temperance and suffrage. Frances Cleveland campaigned heavily for her husband and was called "the most popular woman in the country." The role of "partner" to the President, first established by Abigail Adams, was solidified by Edith Roosevelt and Edith Wilson. Edith Roosevelt helped campaign for her husband, Teddy, and became his behind-the-scenes partner.

In 1919, after Woodrow Wilson suffered a stroke, Edith Wilson stepped in to help manage his Presidential and private affairs. She was often referred to as "the First woman President," but her support and work ethic provided stability for the United States while the country was coming out of World War I.

A Changing Country, a Changing Image

The technological advances of the 20th century led to the growth of mass media, radio, film, television, and Hollywood. The general public became more aware of the role and personalities of the First Ladies as they acquired celebrity -like status. Americans could read about the gentle-natured Grace Coolidge or Lou Henry Hoover's work with the Girl Scouts. The public could also see what the First Lady was wearing, and they could read about how she spent her time.

The Great Depression, combined with the reach of mass media created a skeptical American public. America needed a popular, socially aware First Lady. Eleanor Roosevelt met the public's expectations and was often called "First Lady of the World." She is credited with setting the precedent for the role of First Lady as a social activist. She also fulfilled appearance obligations for her husband when his polio prevented him from attending.

Although First Ladies were socially proactive, the baby boomer generation in the United States grew up on the iconic maternal images of women like Mamie Eisenhower and Lady Bird Johnson. Both of these First Ladies, however, worked tirelessly for their husbands and promoted social causes for women and children.

Furthermore, Jacqueline Kennedy, a former debutante, brought a renewed prestige and elegance to the White House. She showed tremendous emotional strength while very publicly grieving the loss of her assassinated husband, John Kennedy. She was present for the swearing-in of the Vice President and remained involved in social causes after her husband's untimely death.

The Office of the First Lady, a Powerful Social Reformer

From 1960 to the present, the role of First Lady transformed into a job in its own right. Although the First Lady is not elected, she has an office and a staff.

Pat Nixon complemented her husband's diplomatic efforts abroad, while her successor, Betty Ford, was renowned for contributing to her husband's campaign efforts and for her vocal advocacy of feminism and her personal struggles with addiction. Rosalynn Carter worked with Habitat for Humanity during and preceding her time as First Lady.

A new age of women's independence and equality further advanced the First Lady's exposure with the succession of Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush, and Hillary Rodham Clinton. Nancy's allure as a former actress helped promote the social conservatism of the Reagan administration. Nancy promoted awareness of drug abuse and advocated for addiction treatment. Barbara Bush helped push an agenda that supported education and child literacy.

The 20th-century America closed with arguably the most powerful and visible First Lady since Eleanor Roosevelt: Hillary Clinton. She set the stage for her successors Laura Bush and Michelle Obama. First Ladies of the last generation are viewed as equal partners in their husbands' political efforts as they have undertaken social issues of health and education for children in the United States.

1 . Martha Dandridge Custis Washington (1789-1797)

"I live a very dull life here and know nothing that passes in the town--I never go to any public place; indeed I think I am more like a state prisoner than anything else."

— Letter to Fanny Basset on being the First Lady, October 1789

Tragedy as well as triumph dogged "Lady Washington." Widowed at age 25, left with two small children and one of Virginia's largest estates to manage, in 1759 Martha married a strapping Virginia colonel named George Washington. For 40 years, he wore around his neck a locket containing the image of his "Patsy." Together they endured the hardships of war and the loss of both of Martha's children by her first husband. Martha described herself as "steady as a clock, busy as a bee, and cheerful as a cricket," and she lived up to her own assessment of herself. Martha spent nearly a decade by her husband's side in Army camps during the Revolutionary War and tirelessly made clothing for soldiers from her home in Mount Vernon and at the camps. She was known for her kindness in words and actions. In a 1794 letter she urged a niece to be "as independent as your circumstances will admit.

…dependence is, I think, a wretched state." Yet she could never be independent of "the General." After his death in December 1799, his widow sealed off their bedroom and moved to an attic garret. Two years later, she followed him to the family tomb overlooking the Potomac.

Dress (reproduction)
Courtesy of Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum, and Boyhood Home
Mourning ring, possibly made in England ca. 1770-1802, gold, pearl, crystal, human hair, paper
Courtesy of George Washington's Mount Vernon, Mount Vernon, VA

2. Abigail Smith Adams (1797-1801)

"I desire you would remember the ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. . . . we will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice, or Representation." -Letter to John Adams about the rights of American women, March 1776

One of America's most influential First Ladies, the future Mrs. John Adams was described at age 14 as "a wit" by her future husband. She lived up to the label all her life. Self-educated and outspoken, this 18th-century feminist was dubbed "Mrs. President" by her husband's political opponents for her role as political partner to "Honest John" Adams. One of her most important roles, as she saw it, was her ability to provide peace of mind to John. Abigail was able to competently care for everything at home so that John could serve their country, and he graciously acknowledged her support. Abigail tended the family farm while John was away helping with the budding nation's politics. She managed to keep the family's business financially secure and profitable, while many other patriots' farms were plagued with financial problems. Separation was not easy on Abigail or John because they were deeply in love for the entirety of their lives. In 1800 when the government moved to

Washington, DC, Abigail became the first Presidential wife to inhabit the "chilly castle," as she called the White House, which was still unfinished.

A privy had to be built and laundry hung in the unfinished East Room. Servants hauled water from half a mile away. To avoid impressions of "queenly" behavior, Abigail worked long days balancing her duties as supervisor of the servants and state hostess. The Adamses had five children, one of whom became the nation's sixth President, John Quincy Adams.

Dress (reproduction)
Courtesy of Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum, and Boyhood Home
Bullet Mold, ca. 1775–1783
Courtesy of Adams National Historic Park
Hair Brooch, ca. 1800, Gold, seed pearls, crystal, gold foil, hair
Courtesy of Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA
Dimity “pocket”, ca. 1800s, White dimity with white woven ties
Courtesy of Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA

3. Martha Wayles Skelton Jefferson (1748-1782) Martha Jefferson Randolph (1772-1836)

Thomas Jefferson's wife, Martha, died at the age of 30 after a 10-year marriage that produced six children. Two of them reached maturity; the eldest daughter, also named Martha, resembled her mother in her charm and graciousness. Jefferson established a strict educational regimen for young Martha, fearing that she might one day marry "a blockhead": “8:00-10:00 practicing music; 10:00-1:00 dance 1 day, draw another; 1:00-2:00 draw on the day you dance and write a letter the next; 3:00-4:00 read French; 4:00-5:00 exercise yourself in music till bedtime, read English, write, etc." All this proved useful when Martha, her husband, and seven children moved into the Presidential residence. Five more

children followed, even as Martha impressed guests with her singing, dancing, and harp playing. Her father abolished social formalities, substituting handshakes for bowing, and letting dinner guests seat themselves on a first-come, first-serve basis. He added a hen house, ice and meat houses, wine cellar, and dumbwaiter. He also devised a new name for the Executive Mansion - the President's House. Dolley Madison, wife of Jefferson's Secretary of State, also served as hostess during this administration.

Calling card ca. 1800s Paper, ink
Courtesy of a private lender
Infant’s gown, Ca. 1800-1810
Courtesy of Jefferson’s Monticello

4. Dolley Payne Todd Madison (1768-1849)

Like Martha Washington and Martha Jefferson, Dolley Payne Todd was a widow who went on to marry a future president. She was 25, vivacious and politically skilled; he was 43, several inches shorter than his bride, stiff and intellectual. Being raised a Quaker did nothing to prevent Dolley's love of fine clothes, elegant surroundings or card games, at which she lost heavily. At her husband's Inaugural Ball, the first in United States history, Dolley was radiant in a yellow velvet gown and Parisian turban with bird-of-paradise plumes. All Washington gossiped about her reliance on cosmetics, her $11,000 makeover of the shabby mansion, and her unprecedented use of snuff. But the "Lady Presidentess" was far from frivolous. To help the re-election chances of the man she called "Madison," the First Lady in her mid 40s visited every congressional family, leaving her calling card on silver trays in dozens of Washington hallways. When the British burned the President's House in 1814, Mrs. Madison rescued Gilbert Stuart's famous portrait of Washington by cutting it out of its frame with a penknife. An appropriation of $150,000 from Congress allowed Dolley to oversee another house renovation. In old age, she became a monument herself and was even granted a seat in the House of Representatives, living just around the corner from the presidential mansion she dominated for so long.

The Holy Bible (Personal bible given to Dolly by her niece, Anna Payne, as a confirmation gift.) Daniel Fanshaw for The American Bible Society, New York, 1842
Ink on paper ca. 1845
Courtesy of James Madison's Montpelier, Orange, Virginia: given on behalf of the descendents of John Cole Payne.
Dress (reproduction)
Courtesy of Eisenhower Presidential Library-Museum & Boyhood Home

5. Elizabeth Kortright Monroe (1817-1825)

As retiring as Dolley Madison was outgoing, James Monroe's wife found the President's House a disappointing sequel to an earlier career in Paris. There her husband had served as United States Ambassador, and she, as "Ia belle americaine," once saved Madame de Lafayette from execution. Elizabeth acquired a taste for costly French clothes, paying up to $1,500 per outfit. She also learned to "paint her face," a practice frowned upon in virtuous America. Back in Washington, Elizabeth did not conceal her dislike of the capital's social life. She gave up Mrs. Madison's practice of paying calls, and caused scandal by refusing to make the 1820 wedding of her daughter, Maria, into an occasion of state. Only close friends and relatives were invited to the ceremony, the first of its kind in White House history. Elizabeth avoided Washington during much of her husband's second term, while she was in her mid-50s, staying instead with her two married daughters. Since female guests were not admitted to the Presidential residence in the absence of a hostess, this caused "no little

mortification and disparagement among the ladies." She did help to establish an orphanage in the capital to which she gave $20 and a cow. Family debts contracted during the Presidency forced the Monroes to sell their Virginia plantation and move to New York.

Gown, ca. 1800s
Courtesy of The National First Ladies' Library

6. Louisa Catherine Johnson Adams (1825-1829)

Born in London, Louisa did not see the United States until she was 26 years old. "Had I stepped into Noah's Ark," she later wrote, "I do not think I should have been more utterly astounded." Her formidable mother in-law, Abigail, thought her entirely too foreign, and her husband, a focused and aloof man who loved his country above all else, refused to take her into his confidence. Following the death of an infant daughter, for which she blamed herself, Louisa received from John Quincy Adams a book on "diseases of the mind." Pathetically, she titled her unpublished autobiography, "Adventures of a Nobody." Her life was adventurous indeed. As perhaps the best-traveled woman of her time, Louisa accompanied her diplomat husband to Berlin, St. Petersburg, and Paris, at one point talking her way past French troops loyal to Napoleon. Back home, she paid hundreds of courtesy calls on Washington matrons who might advance John Quincy Adams' presidential cause in 1824. "Oh these visits have me sick," she confided to her diary, "and I really sometimes think they will make me crazy." Her single term as First Lady was not a happy one. A self-described "bird in a cage," the 50-year-old First Lady entertained guests with her harp playing and amateur theatricals. Louisa nurtured silkworms on leaves of mulberry trees, unreeling silk filaments during the evening hours. She also developed a craving for chocolate, spending long days alone on a sofa eating sweets and writing letters. Of her three sons, one committed suicide, and a second died young.

Bracelet and earrings, ca. 1800s, yellow gold, malachite
Courtesy of Adams National Historic Park
Dress (reproduction)
Courtesy of Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum, and Boyhood Home

7. Sarah York Jackson (1834-1837) Rachel Donelson Robards Jackson Emily Tennessee Donelson (1829-1836)

Rachel Donelson was a lively, handsome woman with black hair, brown eyes, and an ardent spirit when she married Lewis Robards at the age of 17. It was an unhappy union, made doubly so by Robards's jealousy and physical abuse. Following their separation, Rachel lived with her mother in Tennessee. There she met young Andrew Jackson, whom she married in 1791 after learning of Robards's divorce action. Two years later, the Jacksons

discovered to their horror that Robards had only won the right to file for divorce; in the eyes of the law and the church, they were living outside the bonds of holy wedlock. They remarried as soon as possible, but the damage was done, both to Jackson's political career and to Rachel's delicate self-esteem. She became deeply religious and easily wounded by cruel remarks about her pipe smoking ways and stout appearance ("fat, forty, but not fair"). In the bitterly contested election of 1828, Jackson triumphed over charges of adultery to win the Presidency. Rachel was apprehensive. "I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord," she declared, "than live in that palace in Washington." As fate had it, she never went to Washington. On December 22, 1828, she died of a heart attack. A devastated President-elect asked Rachel's niece, Emily Donelson, to serve as Presidential hostess to his boisterous celebrations, where visitors hung coats on the fence outside. Emily added running water and spent $50,000 to refurbish the old house. She died at 28, leaving yet another Jackson niece, Sarah York Jackson, to fill in during the President's second term.

Salt cellars , ca. 1800s, silver and gold wash
Courtesy of The Hermitage: Home of President Andrew Jackson, Hermitage, TN

8. Angelica Singleton Van Buren (1839-1841) Hannah Hoes Van Buren

Blonde, beautiful Hannah Van Buren testified to the rigors of wifely existence in 19th-century America. After giving birth to five children, she contracted tuberculosis and died at 35, nearly two decades before her debonair husband entered the Executive Mansion. The widower, nicknamed "The Red Fox of Kinderhook," greeted guests by himself until the arrival of his South Carolinian daughter-in-law, Angelica. Angelica was well-equipped for the role of White House hostess. As a distant relation of Dolley Madison, she favored Dolley's plumed headdresses, impressing the Boston Post as "a lady of

rare accomplishments, very modest yet perfectly easy and graceful in her manners and free and vivacious in her conversation … universally admired." Her father-in law was less fortunate. Criticized for social extravagances such as fingerbowls and regular bathing, Van Buren lost a re-election bid in 1840 in the middle of a depression. He went home to write his memoirs. But the memory of his wife's death was still painful---her name is never mentioned in Van Buren's autobiography.

Reticule with floral hand embroidery, ca. 1800s, silk with embroidery
Courtesy of The National First Ladies' Library

9. Anna Tuthill Symmes Harrison (1841-1841)

At the age of 20, beautiful, willful Anna Symmes enlisted the help of her mother and secretly wed a dashing young soldier named William Henry Harrison. Asked by his disapproving father-in-law how he intended to support Anna, the bridegroom replied, "By

my sword and my own right arm, Sir." In time, they carried Harrison all the way to the White House. Along the way,

Anna lost 8 of her 10 children. Pleading illness, the 66-year-old First Lady stayed behind in North Bend, Ohio, while her 68-year-old husband embarked for Washington. She would follow, Anna promised, when the weather turned spring-like. She never made the trip. On Inauguration Day, 1841, President-elect Harrison spoke for two hours in a driving storm. Later he contracted pneumonia and died after less than a month in office. Ironically enough, the oldest First Lady and the only one who never made it to Washington---on account of her own poor health---outlived her husband by 23 years.

Personal letter, ca. 1800s, paper, ink
Courtesy of Grouseland Home of the 9th President of the United States, Vincennes, IN
Tea cup, ca. 1800s, used by the Harrison's at Grouseland
Courtesy of Grouseland Home of the 9th President of the United States, Vincennes, IN
Painting (reproduction), ca. 1900s, oil on canvas
Courtesy of Grouseland Home of the 9th President of the United States, Vincennes, IN
Portrait of Anna Symmes Harrison, ca. 1800s, paper, ink
Courtesy of Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site
Paper cut-out decoration, belonged to Anna Symmes Harrison ca. 1800s, watercolor
Courtesy of Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site

10. Letitia Christian Tyler (1790-1842) Julia Gardiner Tyler (1820-1889)

John Tyler's first wife, Letitia, proved her mettle by overseeing the family's 500-acre plantation while her husband served in Washington as Vice President. But as First Lady in her early 50s, she had no taste for the capital's social life, gladly yielding her position to her daughter-in-law, Priscilla. When Letitia died in 1842 so did Priscilla Tyler's claim to the throne.In her place came an even younger woman, Miss Julia Gardiner. Earlier, the 24-year-old "Rose of Long Island" had scandalized relatives by appearing in advertisements for New York City department stores. She proved just a unconventional in the White House, dancing the then-daring waltz in the East Room and hiring a press agent to sound her praises. Julia began the custom of having "Hail to the Chief" played for any official Presidential appearance. She greeted visitors while dressed in purple and sitting on a raised platform. In her hair, she wore three feathers. Julia bore her much older husband seven children (added to eight from his first marriage). When he left office in 1845, a political outcast, she retired with him to the Virginia plantation he called Sherwood Forest, in tribute to that other great outlaw, Robin Hood.

Bodice with cap sleeves, ca. 1800s
Courtesy of The National First Ladies' Library
Letter – "Sherwood Forest" to "Sister" Margaret Gardiner, April 2, 1846, paper and ink
Courtesy of the College of William & Mary, Swem Library, Special Collections Research Center
Letter - Julia Gardiner Tyler to Mrs. Laura Holloway, September 20, 1869, paper and ink
Courtesy of the College of William & Mary, Swem Library, Special Collections Research Center

11. Sarah Childress Polk (1845-1849)

Caring little for domestic chores, the well-educated, ambitious Sara Polk had a ready answer when a voter threatened to support Henry Clay, Polk's 1844 opponent, because Mrs. Clay knew how to make butter and look after a house. Said Sarah, "If I get to the White House, I expect to live on $25,000 a year, and I will neither keep house nor make butter." Forty-one and childless at the time of Polk's inauguration, the First Lady left the White House decor as it had been under the Tylers, except for the replacement of outdated oil and candle light with gas. Sarah became something of a heroine to

Washington women who shared her impatience with the limited opportunities available to their sex, and frowned upon dancing, horse races, the theatre, and music on Sundays. The most politically astute First Lady since Abigail Adams, Mrs. Polk was similarly criticized for influencing her husband. Sarah kept a close watch on her husband's fragile health, and habitually reviewed papers for the President's signature. Her concern was well-placed, for James K. Polk died three months after leaving office. Sarah kept their Nashville home, Polk Place, as a shrine to the memory of the 11th President, whom she outlived by 42 years.

Traveling desk, ca. 1800s
Courtesy of the James K. Polk Memorial Association, Columbia, TN
Dress (reproduction)
Courtesy of Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum, and Boyhood Home

12. Mary Elizabeth Taylor Bliss Dandridge (1849-1850) Margaret Mackall Smith Taylor (1849-1850)

Unlike Sarah Polk, Mrs. Zachary Taylor disdained politics and public life. Yet she was as good a soldier as her husband, whose frontier exploits earned him the title "Old Rough and Ready." The woman he called "Peggy" was at his side in remote outposts from the Great Lakes to Baton Rouge. In the pocket of her greatcoat, she carried a pistol for protection against Indian attacks. No such weapon could safeguard her from political attacks, even after she swore off official duties in the White House on account of "delicate health." While her vivacious, popular daughter, Bettie Taylor Bliss, stood in for the First Lady, Mrs. Taylor was ridiculed for allegedly smoking a pipe and being unable to carry on a decent

conversation. Actually, she hated tobacco, and impressed those few who knew her as a woman of great charm and character. When President Taylor died in July 1850, the 62-year-old Peggy fainted at the news. Within two years, she, too, was dead. History records no photograph or other likeness of Mrs. Taylor. It is as if she had finally been swallowed up in the obscurity she sought for so much of her life.

Candlesticks, ca. 1800s, silver
Courtesy of Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans, LA

13. Abigail Powers Fillmore (1850-1853)

Tiny, redheaded Abigail Fillmore loved books more than anything else, especially tea parties. She met her future husband in a Buffalo classroom, and she continued to teach even after he obtained a law degree. The first "working woman" to occupy the White House installed a zinc and mahogany bathtub, and replaced the big open cooking fireplace with the first kitchen stove. Most important of all, Mrs. Fillmore created the White House library where she spent most of her time. Abigail was no invalid, although a weak ankle made reception lines an ordeal. With help from her young daughter, she held weekly dinners for Congressmen, along with Tuesday and Friday night receptions. Her husband's reliance on her can be seen in a letter he wrote when they were briefly apart: "How lonesome this (hotel) room is in your absence. I can hardly bear to sit down. But you have scarcely been out of my mind since you left. How I wish I could be with you." At the 1853 inauguration of Franklin Pierce, Mrs. Fillmore caught a cold that soon turned into pneumonia. Three weeks after leaving the White House, one of the most accomplished, if little known, First Ladies was dead at the age of 55.

The Works: Charles C. Little & James Brown, Daniel Webster, 1851, cloth, paper, ink
Courtesy of Millard Fillmore Presidential Site; Aurora Historical Society
Dress (reproduction)
Courtesy of Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum, and Boyhood Home

14. Jane Means Appleton Pierce (1853-1857)

Perhaps the most tragic of all First Ladies, Jane Appleton hailed from a distinguished New England family that disapproved of Franklin Pierce for his fondness for drink and his love of politics. Mrs. Pierce, "Dearest Jeannie" to her husband, sank into invalidism following the deaths of two of her children. She fainted at the news of Frank's unexpected 1852 nomination for President and prayed that he would lose the election. It was a prayer echoed by her sole surviving son, Bennie. Pierce won, only to see Bennie killed in a train wreck two months before Inauguration Day. Jane Pierce was grief-stricken, and blamed her husband's decision to seek the Presidency for the loss of their son. She withdrew into seclusion, emerging only to sit silently at the family dinner table. Gradually, the center of

social gravity in Washington swung away from the White House to the home of Jefferson Davis, Pierce's Secretary of War. Ill with tuberculosis, the 51-year-old Jane Pierce had to be carried out of the White House in March, 1857. She went home to New Hampshire, where she died six years later.

Gown, ca. 1800s, silk
Courtesy of The National First Ladies' Library
Letter, signed by Jane Pierce, August 2, 1853, paper, ink
Courtesy of the Shapell Manuscript Foundation

15. Harriet Lane Johnston (1857-1861)

As the 27-year-old niece of the nation's only bachelor President, "The Democratic Queen" captured the public's imagination as no one before her. She inspired lower necklines, won the admiration of Queen Victoria, and even had a song dedicated to her: "Listen to the Mocking Bird." Because of her assistance to Native Americans, daughters were named for her. Her personal art collection became the nucleus of Washington's Corcoran Gallery. Blonde, violet eyed, and full of fun, Harriet filled the White House with flowers and had the first greenhouse built in 1857. Her social triumphs included welcoming the Prince of Wales. From her diplomat uncle, Miss Lane learned discretion and exquisite manners. While these qualities led one admirer to call her a model of "deference and grace," they could not smooth over the growing divisions between North and South. Eventually, political enmities invaded the drawing room. Harriet's brilliant social success was one of the few highlights of the Buchanan Administration, which turned a crumbling Union over to Abraham Lincoln in the spring of 1861. Harriet went on to found a Baltimore home for invalid children in memory of her two sons, both of whom she outlived. The Harriet Lane Home is now part of the John Hopkins Memorial Hospital, and its doors are never closed. In her will, she left $100,000 for a statue of her uncle ---no one else in Washington would erect such a monument.

Bracelet, engraved inside "Harriet", ca. 1800s, gold
Courtesy of Lancaster History, Lancaster, PA
Handkerchief, embroidered with "HL" in dark blue thread, ca. 1800s
Courtesy Lancaster History, Lancaster, PA

16. Mary Todd Lincoln (1861-1865)

Mary Todd was born to a socially prominent Kentucky family, but her future husband joked that while God spelled his name with one "d," the Todds of Lexington required two. Young Mary Todd was fluent in French, an accomplished horsewoman, and an excellent student. Charming yet temperamental, she was intensely ambitious. She gave strength to her husband, while needing it for herself throughout his stormy Presidency. Abraham and Mary

Lincoln brought a refreshing element to the White House: youth. They had two young boys with a third son attending Harvard. The White House also received a necessary renovation as worn carpets, tobacco juice stained wallpaper near spittoons, faded draperies, damaged furniture, and torn upholstery were replaced. Foreign dignitaries noticed the improvements but the cost overruns provided cause for complaint from critics, especially in light of the war.

The Civil War brought hardship to the country and the Lincoln's were no exception. Their son Willie died from typhoid fever early in 1862. The Todd family had divided loyalties during the Civil War, giving rise to the rumor that the First Lady was a Southern spy. In spite of her well-known shopping sprees and volatile temper many other aspects went unnoticed by the press. Mrs. Lincoln frequently visited military hospitals around Washington, D.C. bringing food and flowers to recovering soldiers. She often wrote letters for soldiers who could not write either because their arm was amputated or they never went to school. She also led fundraising campaigns on behalf of the "contrabands," former black slaves who escaped to freedom. Mrs. Lincoln witnessed her husband's assassination at Ford's Theatre, an event that traumatized her. After her husband's death, she returned to Chicago and then travelled aboard. Upon her return another son, Tad Lincoln, died. Her erratic behavior led Robert, her only surviving son, to have her committed to a private sanitarium. After four months, she was released and lived with her sister in Springfield, Illinois. Mary Lincoln tried to escape public view with more travels abroad but her health required her to return to Springfield, where she died.

Fan, ca. 1860, ostrich-plume
From the Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection, courtesy of the Indiana State Museum and Historic Site, Indianapolis, IN
Opera glasses, ca. 1870, gilt and mother of pearl
From the Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection, courtesy of the Indiana State Museum and Historic Site, Indianapolis, IN
Dress (reproduction)
Courtesy of Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum, and Boyhood Home

17. Eliza McCardle Johnson (1865-1869)

At the age of 16, Eliza McCardle helped tutor a broad-shouldered lad named Andy Johnson. She taught him his three A's and later assisted him in his tailoring business. When he went into politics, Eliza, now Mrs. Johnson, lent a hand in composing his speeches. For all that, she shrank from the rough-and-tumble world of politics, becoming practically invisible following the death of Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson's unexpected elevation to the Presidency.

The new First Lady made only two appearances; one at a White House dinner, the other at a party for the Johnson grandchildren. Yet behind the scenes she was more active, reading widely and making sure that her embattled husband saw newspaper clippings---bad news in the morning, good news at night. Her daughter, Martha Patterson, filled in as White House hostess. "We are plain folks from Tennessee" she explained, "called here by a national calamity. I hope not too much will be expected of us." As if to prove it, Martha kept two cows on the front lawn, skimming their milk herself, and covering threadbare carpets with old muslin. Both Johnson women shared the ordeal of the President's impeachment, and both rejoiced when the Senate, by a single vote, failed to convict. Mrs. Johnson insisted she had foreseen the outcome all along. Eliza left the White House in 1869 at the age of 59 and disappeared from view, as she has largely disappeared from history.

Brooch, ca. 1800s
Courtesy Andrew Johnson National Historic Site
Head cover ca. 1800s Lace
Courtesy Andrew Johnson National Historic Site

18. Julia Dent Grant (1826-1902)

The daughter of wealthy Missouri slaveholders, Julia Dent fell in love with and married her brother's West Point roommate---a short, aloof fellow with the unlikely name of Ulysses S. Grant. Better at dealing with horses than humans, Ulysses left army life after the Mexican War, which contributed to his abuse of alcohol while on lonely posts in the American West. In civilian life, he failed at real estate and in managing a harness store. The coming of war in 1861 rescued Grant from obscurity and made his wife a national celebrity. Mary Lincoln threatened to leave the country if "that butcher" ever became President. He did, and she did. The 1874 marriage of the Grants' daughter, Nellie, attracted international attention along with Julia's celebrated 29-course dinners and her White House decorating, later ridiculed as "Steamboat Gothic." Grant's term was marred by corruption and excess. When it ended, the former President and his wife went on a three-year journey around the world, celebrated and honored by each country visited. They received lavish gifts, including an entire room full of furnishings from Japan. Late in life, Grant went bankrupt. While on his deathbed in a desperate race with time, he finished his memoirs. Their success inspired Julia to become the first First Lady to write her own autobiography, recalling her White House years from ages 43 to 51 as "a bright and beautiful dream." She also recorded her husband's refusal to allow her crossed eyes to be surgically corrected. Ulysses loved her eyes as they were---and that was that.

Fan, ca. 1870s
Courtesy Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site
Handkerchief, ca. 1870s

Courtesy Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site
Dress (reproduction)
Courtesy of Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum, and Boyhood Home

19. Lucy Ware Webb Hayes (1877-1881)

Far more than simply "Lemonade Lucy" of popular legend, Mrs. Rutherford B. Hayes was a pioneering feminist. The first woman enrolled at Ohio Weslyan, young Lucy declared, "Woman's mind is as strong as man's ... equal in all things and his superior in some." Despite giving birth to eight children in 20 years, Mrs. Hayes maintained a lively interest in public affairs. Said her soldier husband during the Civil War: "Lucy enjoys (the action) and wishes she had been in Fort Sumter with a garrison of women." Politics presented another kind of action, and Lucy rose to the challenge. As the wife of Ohio's governor, she visited state prisons and mental hospitals, and raised funds to build a facility for war orphans. Following her husband's narrow election to the Presidency in 1876, she installed the first White House telephone and began an annual Easter Egg Roll on the South Lawn. In her late 40s, she campaigned for women's suffrage and against the evils of intemperance. Crowds cheered her on a cross-country tour. One banner of greeting hailed the First Lady for her ban on alcohol at official functions. "She hath done what she could," it proclaimed. Lucy Hayes did much in her husband's single term to win the nation's affection. Banishing the White House billiard table to the basement, she held daily prayer meetings and weekly hymn singing. Her face was featured everywhere, sometimes on private products without her consent. Lucy Hayes proved to be the most widely admired First Lady since Dolley Madison.

Dress (reproduction)
Courtesy of Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum, and Boyhood Home
Lucy Hayes WCTU hanging, ca. 1880s
Courtesy of Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center, Fremont, OH
Gloves, ca. 1880s
Courtesy of Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center, Fremont, OH
Comb, ca. 1880s
Courtesy of Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center, Fremont, OH

20. Lucretia Rudolph Garfield (1881-1881)

The future Mrs. James Garfield met her husband at Ohio's Hiram College, where both were studying to be teachers. Lucretia enjoyed the financial and emotional independence that came with such work. Just before their wedding she wrote her fiancé, "My heart is not yet schooled to an entire submission to that destiny which will make me the wife of one who marries me."

Thanks to James's budding political career and his service in the Civil War, the young couple spent little time together. Worse, the attractive Garfield paid attention to other women. Only the death of two of their children brought James closer to the woman he called "Crete." As First Lady, Lucretia hired seven people to form the Bureau of Apartments and undertook detailed research into White House history.

The President's mother came to live in the Executive Mansion, the first such relation to do so. After July 2, 1881, Lucretia kept vigil at her husband's bedside, where he lay suffering from a bullet fired by a deranged office-seeker. When Garfield died 3½ months later, his 49-year-old widow insisted on taking part in his funeral, another first. A grieving public showered Lucretia and her family with over $350,000 in spontaneous contributions. Congress voted her family an annual pension of $5,000. She devoted the rest of her long life to preserving Garfield's papers and his memory.

Handkerchief, used for mourning, and monogrammed “LRG” for Lucretia Rudolph Garfield
ca. 1881, linen
Courtesy Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio
Dress (reproduction)
Courtesy of Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum, and Boyhood Home

21. Mary Arthur McElroy (1881-1885) Ellen Lewis Herndon Arthur

Ellen Arthur is one of the more shadowy Presidential wives. Little is known of her, save a love of music that she shared with her elegant, millionaire husband, Chester. In the winter, the Arthurs welcomed members of the Mendelssohn Glee Club to their Lexington Avenue home, a refuge from New York's chilly climate. Ironically, Ellen contracted pneumonia in January 1880, dying 10 months before her husband's election as Vice President. The widower Arthur replaced James Garfield that September. He refused to move to that "badly kept barracks" (the White House) until Louis Tiffany redecorated the old house from top to bottom. Twenty-four wagonloads of hair mattresses, marble mantels, and cuspidors were hauled off to auction. They were replaced by a robin's egg blue color scheme and the first tiled bathroom in White House history. Arthur invited his sister, Mrs. Mary McElroy, to serve as official hostess for the next 3½ years. The "Dude President" was famous for the cut of his clothes, the quality of his food, and the warmth of his manner. He even welcomed Susan B. Anthony and a delegation of suffragettes, one of them dressed in a man's frock coat and high silk hat. Although he was considered the most eligible bachelor in America, President Arthur remained single, perhaps in memory of Ellen, whose stained glass portrait in St. John's Church was visible from the President's bedroom window.

Bonnet, ca. 1880s velvet, fabric
Courtesy of The National First Ladies’ Library

22. & 24. Frances Folsom Cleveland (1886-1889, 1893-1897)

Bachelor Grover Cleveland asked his sister, Rose, to serve as hostess in his first term. A prominent lecturer on women's rights and recognized literary scholar, Rose Cleveland confessed that she passed the time during boring reception lines by silently conjugating Greek verbs. Rose did not have to worry after June 1886, when her brother wed 21-year-old Frances Folsom, daughter of Cleveland's one time law partner, who in her youth had called him "Uncle Cleve." John Philip Sousa's Marine Band serenaded the couple as they appeared in the Blue Room, and their wedding was a national celebration. Reporters, equipped with spyglasses and cameras, followed the newlyweds to a Maryland mountain resort. Frances was an instant sensation. Women copied her hairstyle and thronged to her thrice-weekly receptions. Her picture appeared on commercial advertisements, not always with her consent. She created a "living green" vogue for potted ferns and flowers, filling the old house with circular ottomans, lace curtains, and velvet fringe. During a nasty re-election campaign, however, she was forced to publicly deny a report that her husband beat her. When he was defeated in 1888, a confident Frances assured White House staffers, "I'll be back." Four years later, she proved as good as her word. Two daughters were born to the Clevelands during their second term of residence at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Otherwise, it was an unhappy period, marked by hard times and a split in Cleveland's own party. Five years after his death in 1908, Frances becamethe first Presidential widow to remarry. She lived to age 83, surviving seven Presidents, including Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who had visited the Cleveland White House as a boy.

Letter and invitation, Cleveland announces and invites his postmaster to his White House wedding, June 25, 1886, paper, ink
Courtesy of Shapell Manuscript Foundation
Gown, ca. 1800s
Courtesy of The National First Ladies' Library

23. Caroline Lavinia Scott Harrison (1889-1892)

One of the most accomplished, yet least known of American First Ladies, Caroline Lavinia Scott was the daughter of a Presbyterian minister who strongly believed in education for women. Although she took little interest in politics, Mrs. Benjamin Harrison was active in public affairs. She served as first President General of the Daughters of the American Revolution and raised funds for the Johns Hopkins Medical School, on the condition that it be co-educational. Frustrated in her efforts to expand the White House, the First Lady settled for installing electric lights, putting up the first White House Christmas tree, displaying china from previous administrations, and installing a porcelain-lined bathtub that, according to President Harrison," would tempt a duck to wash himself every day." A gifted artist, Mrs. Harrison designed her own striking pattern of official china and painted

in her spare time. Much of the public's interest centered on Mrs. Harrison's irrepressible grandson, "Baby McKee," who once drove a go-cart off into Pennsylvania Avenue, followed in hot pursuit by the President of the United States wearing a top hat and frock coat. At the height of her husband's unsuccessful campaign for re-election, Caroline contracted tuberculosis. In October 1892, at the age of 60, she became the second First Lady to die in office. Her daughter, Mary McKee, took over the duties of White House hostess. Not long after his term ended, ex-President Harrison remarried his late wife's niece, Mary Lord Dimmick.

Dress, ca. 1890s, silk
Courtesy of Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site
Calling card, ca. 1889, paper, ink
Courtesy of Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site
Calling card case, initials “CSH”, ca. 1890, leather, metal
Courtesy of Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site
Yellow primroses Caroline Harrison, ca. 1890, watercolor on paper
Courtesy of Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site

25. Ida Saxton McKinley (1897-1901)

As a young woman, Ida Saxton was witty, vivacious, and headstrong. She worked in her father's bank until her 1871 marriage to Maj. William McKinley and moved into a house presented to them by Ida's affluent parents. Two years later, tragedy struck: in a single year the young wife lost both parents, her five-month-old daughter, and a second child who died shortly afterward.

The combined blows sent Ida into a sickly, semi-invalid state from which she never recovered. During McKinley's term as Governor of Ohio, he stopped whatever he was doing each afternoon at 3 p.m. to wave from his office window to the sickly figure in a hotel room across the street. In the White House, Mrs. McKinley held a bouquet to foil would-be handshakers. The country was told nothing of her delicate condition, as it was an age when even mentioning the word "epilepsy" was considered in bad taste. Malicious gossip spread that she was insane. At state dinners, the President sat beside her, ready to toss a napkin over her face at the first sign of a seizure, while behaving as if nothing unusual had happened. Eventually, Ida would recover, picking up the conversation where she had left off. On September 6, 1901, an anarchist in Buffalo shot President McKinley, whose last words were typical of his concern for his wife: "Be careful how you tell her." Yet the 54-year-old First Lady astonished friends by the strength she showed during the next eight days and the funeral that followed. The invalid survived her robust husband by six years, during which she supervised construction of an enormous mausoleum patterned after the Taj Mahal.

Dress (reproduction)
Courtesy of Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum,and Boyhood Home
Slippers, Ida McKinley ca. 1905, tan wool, leather soles
Courtesy of the McKinley Presidential Library & Museum, Canton, OH

26. Edith Kermit Carow Roosevelt (1901-1909)

As a child, Edith Carow played alongside her New York neighbor, Theodore Roosevelt. She later rejected a marriage proposal from TR on the grounds that she was too young. Roosevelt soon went off to Harvard where he fell in love with Alice Lee. After four years, the first Roosevelt marriage ended in dual tragedy: both TR's wife and his mother died on the same day. Within two years, Teddy again proposed to Edith, who this time accepted. They had five children plus the rambunctious Alice, named for her late mother. In the White House, the Roosevelt youngsters were famous for their antics: walking the halls on stilts, skating on polished floors and keeping a small "zoo" that included raccoons, badgers, bears, guinea pigs, and Alice's pet snake, Emily Spinach, who accompanied her to elegant parties draped over one arm. Few First Ladies have left a greater stamp on official Washington than Edith Roosevelt. In 1902, the 41 year-old First Lady oversaw a massive reconstruction of the White House. Presidential offices were moved to the West Wing, greenhouses were replaced by tennis courts, and family quarters were consolidated on the second floor. The residence itself was now officially dubbed "the White House," and the First Lady hired a social secretary to handle her schedule. She watched expenditures as carefully as her time. When a newspaper wrote that the thrifty Edith dressed on $300 a year and looked it, Mrs. Roosevelt proudly clipped the story for her scrapbook. The well-read President thought his wife more intellectually gifted than he; she thought TR the biggest of her children. Both loved the outdoors. Following his death in 1919, Edith traveled extensively. She outraged some members of her extended family in 1932 when she publicly endorsed President Hoover's re-election campaign against her husband's distant cousin, Franklin. As a loyal Republican, Edith had no regrets, until election day anyway. Perhaps her greatest sacrifice was that of three sons, lost in the world wars. By the time of her death in 1948, she had outlived a majority of her children.

Hat, ca. 1902, velvet, plumes, fabric
Courtesy of The National First Ladies' Library
Letter, written by Edith two weeks after McKinley's death to Mrs. Lemle in Boston
September 27, 1901, paper, ink
Courtesy of the Shapell Manuscript Foundation

27. Helen Herron Taft (1909-1913)

At the age of 22, Nellie Taft wrote: "I have thought that a woman should be independent and not regard matrimony as the only thing to be desired in life." The daughter of a Cincinnati judge, Nellie had ambitions even at the age of 17, when she visited the Hayes White House and decided she would one day be First Lady of the land. But for females in Nellie's circle, the chief path to achievement lay through a husband's career. In 1886 she wed Will Taft, and for the next quarter-century she deflected his preference for a judicial career in favor of politics. For four years as wife of the Governor General of the Philippines, she lived in exotic splendor. Being married to Teddy Roosevelt's Secretary of War was a comedown, acceptable only if it led to Will's nomination for President in 1908. With Teddy Roosevelt's blessing, the reluctant Taft threw his hat into the ring and was elected on the strength of the retiring President's popularity. On Inauguration Day 1909, the new First Lady, at age 48, startled observers by riding next to her husband in the procession back to the White House. "Of course there was objection," she wrote later, "but I had my way." She usually did. She sacked the U.S. Ambassador to France in recollection of an imagined snub on her honeymoon, more that 20 years earlier. She insisted on saving one-third of the President's newly raised $75,000 salary, put a cow on the White House lawn for milk, and hired the first housekeeper to supervise the purchase and preparation of food. But Helen Taft's happiness was short-lived. Two months after becoming First Lady, she suffered a stroke. It took more than a year for her to regain the power of speech. By their Silver Anniversary in 1911, the Tafts had little else to celebrate, Teddy Roosevelt was already threatening to run against the man he had installed as his successor just two years earlier. Before Taft gave way in 1913 to Woodrow Wilson, the First Lady convinced the city of Tokyo to donate 3,000 cherry trees to ring the Tidal Basin. Today, their brilliant blossoms recall the determined, high-minded First Lady who proved the old axiom, "Beware of what you wish for, you may get it."

Dress (reproduction)
Courtesy of Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum, and Boyhood Home
Hat, ca. 1910, velvet, plumes, fabric
Courtesy of The National First Ladies' Library

28. Edith Balling Galt Wilson (1915-1921)

This Washington widow was 43 when a friend introduced her to Woodrow Wilson early in 1915. The President was desperately lonesome following the death of his wife Ellen and was oppressed by the war in Europe. He took an immediate fancy to the stylish Mrs. Galt. Her late husband had bequeathed her one of Washington's premier jewelry shops, and she traced her ancestry to Pocahontas and shared Wilson's love of all things Southern. Ignoring political advice to put off their marriage until after the 1916 election, Woodrow and Edith wed in December 1915. The next morning the 59-year-old President of the United States was heard walking through a railroad car singing a popular song of the period: "Oh, You

Beautiful Doll, You Great Big Beautiful Doll." The second Mrs.Wilson was soon immersed in war work. A flock of sheep appeared on the White House lawn, their wool sold to benefit the Red Cross. Secret Service agents for the first time protected a First Lady. In 1918, Edith became the first Presidential wife to travel abroad, accompanying her husband tothe Versailles Peace Conference. She was at his side as he campaigned across America for his proposed League of Nations and drew a protective shield around Wilson following his massive stroke in October 1919. So tightly did she control access to the stricken chief executive that she was dubbed "Mrs. President" by lawmakers critical of "petticoat government." In fact, she cared nothing for politics and everything for the health of the man she called "my precious." After Wilson's death in 1924 (his last word was "Edith!"), his widow remained highly visible in Washington, DC, and in Democratic Party affairs. As late as 1961, she could still refer to her husband's arch-enemy, Henry Cabot Lodge, as "that stinking snake." Edith was 89 when she died on December 28, 1961, Woodrow's birthday.

Worth three-piece suit, worn during Peace Treaty negotiations at Versailles 1919, wool (suit), silk (blouse)
Courtesy of The President Woodrow Wilson Home, Washington DC, a historic site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation
Red Cross medal (Order of the Italian Cross), 1919, metal
Courtesy of The President Woodrow Wilson Home, Washington DC, A historic site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation
Hat (reproduction) Celia Reyerwill Feathers
The Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum

29. Florence Kling DeWolf Harding (1860-1924)

A divorcee abused by her first husband, Florence Kling DeWolfe made a precarious living by giving piano lessons in Marion, Ohio. She then met an amiable newspaper editor five years her junior, named Warren Harding. Florence's father rejected Harding, locally rumored to have Negro blood, and practically disowned his daughter after she wed her "W'urren." The marriage was not a happy one. While Harding relied on his wife's drive and business skills to make the Marion Star a success, she looked the other way as he pursued women younger and less brittle than she. Yet long after Harding had abandoned hope of gaining the 1920 Republican Presidential nomination, she insisted that he stay in the race. She consulted a Washington astrologer who predicted his election but also forecast that President Harding would die in office. With her heavily rouged cheeks, marcelled hair, rimless glasses, and shrill voice, Florence Harding was called "the Duchess" by her husband. In her early 60s, no First Lady worked harder. Before one New Year's Day reception, Mrs. Harding was forced to spend two days in bed gathering strength. She had lost a kidney many years before, and nearly died of kidney failure in 1922. Her insistence on secrecy boomeranged in August 1923 when her husband suffered a fatal stroke while

visiting San Francisco, and malicious gossip pointed a finger at the Duchess. She was naturally weary of Warren's womanizing yet anxious to spare him the scandalous revelations of Teapot Dome. In the middle of the night, the First Lady slipped downstairs to the East Room where she could be heard talking to the coffin. "Warren," she said, "they can't hurt you now." Within a year, Florence Harding followed her husband to the grave before she could finish burning every incriminating paper that might link him to the scandals for which he is remembered anyway. It was the final realization of the astrologer's forecast.

Jewelry box, handmade by a veteran in a job retraining program at Walter Reed Hospital with initials "F.K.H." on clasp, date unknown (ca. 1919-1923??), beaten-silver
Courtesy of the Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, OH
Dress (reproduction)
Courtesy of Eisenhower Presidential Library-Museum & Boyhood Home

30. Grace Anna Goodhue Coolidge (1879-1957)

As warm and outgoing as her dour Yankee husband was emotionally frugal, this former teacher of the deaf from Burlington, Vermont, became one of America's most popular First Ladies. She loved music, theatre, and books. She avoided politics. She granted no interviews and made but a single speech -in sign language. But her humor and high spirits won her the nickname of "Sunshine" from White House staffers. Better than anyone else, she understood her husband: his streak of sentiment and his odd ways. Shortly after their wedding and a quick honeymoon in Montreal, cut short so that Cal could campaign for the Northampton School Committee, the groom dumped 52 pairs of socks on his bride. Grace asked if he had married her for her darning. "No," he answered, "but I find it mightly handy." He found her handier still when summoned unexpectedly to the Presidency following the death of Warren Harding. No man was more king-like in his castle. The President refused permission to the 44-year-old Grace to bob her hair or ride horseback. He supervised White House provisions from the nearest Piggly Wiggly store. Yet his love was obvious and even extravagant, judging from the hats and dresses he picked out for her and insisted she wear, whatever their cost or her own fashion opinion. The whole nation grieved with the First Lady in the summer of 1924 when she lost her son, Calvin Junior, to blood poisoning-the end result of a blister received on the White House tennis courts.

In time, Grace's good spirits revived enough to needle her husband's habit of summoning his pet raccoon, Rebecca, by blowing a whistle."What's the matter, Pappa," she asked mischievously, "don't your teeth fit tonight?" Mrs. Coolidge established the White House Office of Protocol. In 1927, she and the President moved to Dupont Circle while a third story was added to the executive mansion. Following Coolidge's retirement, the former First Lady renewed her work on behalf of the deaf. She also became known as the Number

One fan of the Boston Red Sox. After Cal's death, she traveled to Europe, cherished her son John and his family, and went up in an airplane, something Cal had strictly forbade. She died in 1957 and was laid to rest beside her husband, where 24 years earlier she had these words read: "Warm summer sun, shine kindly here, warm southern wind, blow softly here; Green sod above, lie light, lie light, Good night, dear heart, good night, good night."

Girl Scout Uniform, worn during her term as honorary president of the Girl Scouts in the 1920s, ca. 1919-1928, khaki cotton twill
Courtesy of the Historic Northampton, Northampton, MA

31. Lou Henry Hoover (1874-1944)

The daughter of a banker from Waterloo, Iowa, Lou Henry inherited her father's love of the outdoors. She joined him on hiking, hunting, and camping trips while growing up in California. As Stanford University's first female geology student, she met fellow Iowan Herbert Hoover. They wed in 1899 and promptly set sail for China, where he became Chief of the Bureau of Mines for the Peking government. There they came under attack during the Boxer Rebellion against foreign influence. It was the first of many adventures for the high-spirited Lou, who was in many ways a woman ahead of her time. By the time her first son was four years old, he had circled the world four times. As a Washington wife, Mrs. Hoover helped end the antique practice of leaving calling cards. She delivered speeches to raise funds to feed starving Belgians during World War I, and became a national figure as the "Hooverizing" wife of the nation's food czar. As First Lady, Lou brought to the White House the sophistication of a global traveler. Lou was the first First Lady to speak on the radio, and also the first to cause a storm of protest by entertaining the wife of a black Congressman in the White House. She hired an assistant to help catalog the White House and its historic furnishings, a feat not attempted again until Jacqueline Kennedy served as First Lady. The White House continues to use the catalog and numbering system created by Lou. The Hoovers welcomed a record number of guests during their term, most of the visits addressed a changing economic climate. A fire in the West Wing in December 1929, reflected the economic blaze set off on Wall Street two months earlier. Soon, the First Lady was appealing for donations to help the jobless. She answered thousands of requests for Depression-era assistance herself, while continuing to serve as President of the Girl Scouts, welcoming important artists to the White House, and shielding her husband from the emotional turmoil of those bleak years. After leaving Washington in 1933, Mrs. Hoover enjoyed life in Palo Alto, California, with Bert, her grandchildren, her Girl Scouts, and numerous Stanford friends and admirers. When she died in January 1944, her husband found Lou's desk filled with checks sent by strangers she had once helped financially. Lou simply hadn't bothered to cash them, maintaining her belief in quiet, Quaker generosity.

Dress and cape ca. 1930s chiffon
The Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum
Secretaire-a-abattant - Monroe Desk (reproduction), Morris W. Dove, 1932, mahogany with ormolu mounts
Bequest of Margaret Hoover Brigham, The Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum. This desk is a reproduction of one on which James Monroe drafted the Monroe Doctrine, was commissioned by Lou Hoover for the "Monroe Room". Lou had two copies of the desk made. One was given to the White House and is still there, the other she used herself. Upon her death it was given to her daughter-in-law, Margaret Watson Hoover (wife of Herbert Hoover Jr.). Upon the death of Margaret Hoover the desk became the property of her oldest daughter, Margaret Hoover Brigham.

A Minerva goddess (Goddess of Wisdom and a prominent figure of the State seal of California), artist unknown, oil on canvas, oak frame
Bequest of Margaret Hoover Brigham, The Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum

This painting hung in the stairwell to the third floor of the Herbert Hoover home at Stanford University in California.

Portrait of Lou Henry (Mrs. Herbert) Hoover, Richard Marsden Brown (Copy of the official portrait by Philip De Laszlo), 1950, oil on canvas
Bequest of Margaret Hoover Brigham, The Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum

Scrimshaw chest- tabletop chest on associated stand, maker unknown- Given to Herbert Hoover during the 1928 South American Tour mixed woods, ivory/bone, tortoiseshell, 1928
Bequest of Margaret Hoover Brigham, The Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum

Cadillac, gift to Lou Hoover, 1929
Courtesy of anonymous donor

32. Anna Eleanor Roosevelt Roosevelt (1884-1962)

Few American lives have had the historical impact as that of Eleanor Roosevelt. From childhood, when her mother called the serious little girl "Granny" and her adored father surrendered to drinking, Eleanor identified with society's outcasts. According to her cousin Alice, "Never has a woman so comforted the distressed or so distressed the comfortable." First, however, Eleanor had to overcome her formidable mother-in-law, Sarah Delano. She bore six children in 10 years with the knowledge that her husband loved a younger, prettier woman. Out of such trials emerged a different Eleanor Roosevelt, sympathetic as ever but with a will of steel. Her newfound purpose enabled her to teach in a New York settlement house, even as Franklin served as Governor. It made her re-think her old

opposition to women's suffrage. It cast her as FDR's eyes and ears. Eleanor's White House code name was "Rover." And it made her the most highly visible First Lady in history. She wrote a daily newspaper column, promoted female candidates for government jobs, and quit the DAR in protest when the organization banned Negro singer Marian Anderson from its Washington, DC. concert hall. She held hundreds of news conferences. Never again were Presidential wives consigned to the background. Good Housekeeping dubbed Eleanor "Our Flying First Lady." Caring little for clothing, friends grew accustomed to seeing her in $10 dresses. Mrs. Roosevelt summed up her philosophy in her autobiography:"If you prepare yourself at every point as well as you can ... you will be able to grasp opportunity for broader experience when it appears. Without preparation you cannot do it. The fatal thing is rejection, for life was meant to be lived and curiosity must be kept alive. One must never, for whatever reason, turn one's back on life." After FDR's death in 1945, Mrs. Roosevelt achieved new heights as a U.S. representative to the United Nations and as a prominent power in the Democratic party. Her work on the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights won her the title "First Lady of the World." She died in November 1962. Adlai Stevensen said of her, "She would rather light a candle than curse the darkness, and her glow has warmed the world."

Evening gown, 1939, natural alencon lace, taffeta, velvet
Courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, Hyde Park, NY
Democratic National Convention courtesy card, 1940, paper and ink
Courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, Hyde Park, NY

33. Elizabeth "Bess" Virginia Wallace Truman (1885-1982)

A small-town girl from Missouri who met her future husband in Sunday school at the age of five, young Bess Wallace loved to swim, hunt, and fish. She also played baseball and tennis, and skated. At 18, her father, David Wallace, committed suicide; the loss may have bred in Bess a desire for privacy that shaped her later actions as First Lady. Certainly Bess Truman differed dramatically from Eleanor Roosevelt. She canceled her predecessor's press conferences, and stayed out of the limelight as much as possible. Yet if she voiced few opinions in public, she may have had more actual influence over her husband's decisions than any First Lady before or since. President Truman had learned to respect Bess's judgment since the time she had helped edit his early speeches. Now he consulted her on the atomic bomb, the Marshall Plan, and the Korean War. It was only half in jest that Truman referred to Bess as "the Boss." White House staffers said they had never seen a closer family than the Trumans. Harry, Bess, and Margaret collectively earned the nickname of "the Three Musketeers." The family moved out of the White House in 1949 while the Executive Mansion was being completely rebuilt at a cost of nearly $6 million. Mrs. Truman carried on her social and ceremonial duties across the street at Blair House. Asked the primary qualifications for being First Lady, Mrs.Truman responded

unhesitatingly that they were "good health and a sense of humor." Bess retained both, even after 1953 when the Trumans went home to Independence, Missouri. Years later, the former President came downstairs one morning to find his wife burning papers in the fireplace. He asked what they were, and Bess told him that they were his love letters from long ago. Mr. Truman was shocked. "Think of history," he exclaimed to Bess. "I am, Harry," replied the former First Lady, "I am." Bess Truman lived on to become the oldest woman ever to have served as First Lady (age 68 at the end of her term).

Long before her death at 97 in 1982, she had won her own special place in history, more than justifying her daughter's description of the First Lady's position as "the second toughest job in America."

Evening dress, ca. mid-1900s
Courtesy of Harry S. Truman Library
Evening bag made in France, ca. mid-1900s
Courtesy of Harry S. Truman Library
Photograph, Trumans, Daniels, President and Mrs. Kennedy in White House foyer ca. mid-1900s
Courtesy of Harry S. Truman Library

34. Mary "Mamie" Geneva Doud Eisenhower (1896-1979)

The daughter of a Boone, Iowa, meat packer, Mamie Doud was six years younger than the handsome soldier she married in Denver in 1916. It was the start of a globetrotting adventure that would take her to 29 different homes in as many years of army life, before bringing her in 1953 to the White House. Early in their marriage, when Ike was about to go off to army maneuvers and leave his young bride for a few weeks, Mamie protested to no avail. Eisenhower put his hand on her shoulder and explained, "You have to understand something, Mamie. The Army will always come first." But by the time she was 57 years old, Mamie herself came first with the American public. They loved the petite First Lady and her trademark bangs. They cooked up Mamie Fudge, decorated their homes in Mamie Pink, and followed suit when the President and First Lady ate dinner off TV trays in their private quarters. As the wife of a five-star general, Mrs. Eisenhower knew how to give orders. She was also well-versed in the art of entertaining. In her first year in Washington, she shook an average of 700 hands a day, despite a rheumatic heart condition that confined her to bed for most of each morning and made her shy away from air travel. Following her husband's first heart attack, Mamie presented him with a set of oil paints and canvas, and he found a new and immensely satisfying form of recreation. She doted on her grandchildren, christening one in the Blue Room of the White House, perhaps recalling the tragic loss of her first son, Icky, to scarlet fever in 1921. Mrs. Eisenhower avoided speeches and the affairs of government. Yet she embodied popular notions of femininity and became as

symbolic of the 1950s as the President himself. As late as 1969, Mamie was ranked by the Gallup Poll as the world's most admired woman. Following her husband's death that year, she lived quietly at their Gettysburg farmhouse. Her own death in November 1979 nearly coincided with that of two other famous widows from World War II, Mrs. Charles DeGaulle and Mrs. Benito Mussolini.

Gown and gloves, wore to the State Dinner for Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip, 1957
Courtesy of the Eisenhower Presidential Library- Museum & Boyhood Home
Matching Handbag, worn to the State Dinner for Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip, 1957
Courtesy of the Eisenhower Presidential Library- Museum & Boyhood Home

35. Jacqueline Lee Bouvier Kennedy Onassis (1929-1994)

Jacqueline Bouvier was the daughter of a New York stockbroker, and early on reflected his taste and sense of drama. She was named “Queen Deb” of 1947. Greater accomplishments lay ahead, including a job as a newspaper photographer in Washington, DC, where she interviewed a freshman Senator from Massachusetts named Jack Kennedy. Romance blossomed, and the two were married in 1953. The new Mrs. Kennedy did not share her husband's taste for politics. At the age of 32, and as the youngest First Lady since Frances Cleveland, Jackie Kennedy symbolized the youthfulness and vigor of post Eisenhower America. She brought elegance, intelligence, and beauty to the Kennedy White House. She invited great artists to perform there, simplified dinners, and eliminated the traditional receiving line in favor of more informal conversation. A lifelong interest in the arts and historic preservation led the First Lady to undertake the restoration of the White House. At the same time, she created the first professional museum and curatorial staff to care for the treasures of rare paintings and historic furnishings that she had gathered. Her televised tour of the White House in 1962 won her an Emmy Award. Meanwhile, Mrs. Kennedy hired the first full-time secretary to handle relations with the press. Jackie's influence upon popular fashion and culture was unmatched. Her softspoken, slightly breathless speaking voice became a permanent feature of the early 1960s, along with pillbox hats and images of herself and her two small children. She lost a third child, Patrick, in September 1963, and two months later, her husband. Few who saw the young widow walking down Pennsylvania Avenue behind the caisson bearing John Kennedy's casket will ever forget the sight. The funeral, majestic and moving, was planned by Mrs. Kennedy herself. Throughout her life she remained in the headlines, even while seeking refuge from the spotlighIft.her second marriage to Greek shipping magnate, Aristotle Onassis caused controversy, Mrs. Onassis won widespread admiration for the way she raised her children and contributed to the Kennedy legacy. She worked at a New York publishing house and remained active on behalf of historic preservation and the Kennedy Presidential Library until her death in 1994.

Yellow Suit, Oleg Cassini ca. 1962, wool
Courtesy of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

36. Claudia Alta "Lady Bird" Taylor Johnson (1912-2007)

Claudia Johnson was a painfully shy child, raised by a spinster aunt who taught her to love books but almost nothing of dresses or dancing. Named "Ladybird" by an admiring nurse, she studied journalism at the University of Texas. In 1934, she wed a 26-year-old congressional aide. "I knew I had met something remarkable," she said later, "but I wasn't sure exactly what." Prodded by Lyndon B. Johnson, Ladybird soon found her voice. She ran his congressional office while he was in the South Pacific during World War II. She managed a radio station in Austin, later augmented by a television station. Asked if she campaigned for Lyndon, she replied, "No, indeed ... I just go along with Mr. George and sit on the platform to show them I don't have a club foot." In truth, she was a superb campaigner, warm and gracious, with an obvious interest in people and the ability to communicate her concerns. Her 1964 "Ladybird Special" made 45 stops in eight southern states, where the First Lady was credited with blunting the regional appeal of Barry Goldwater. The President called her his most valued counselor. In the White House, the 51-year-old Mrs. Johnson elevated conservation and beautification to national priorities. She led a campaign that cleaned up Washington, DC's tourist areas and inner cities, a legacy that continues to this day. She also had a hand in the birth of the Head Start, a program that continues to prepare pre-school children to get the most out of education. She told White House staffers that her husband's needs came first, followed by those of her two daughters; her own came last. However modest she may have been, historians hold a different opinion by ranking her among the most successful First Ladies of all time. After her husband's death in 1973, Mrs. Johnson continued to live at the LBJ Ranch, pursue environmental causes, and create a National Wildflower Research Center in the Texas Hill Country.

Jacket and skirt set with hat, worn for inauguration oath of office, Neiman Marcus, 1961, silk
Courtesy of Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and Museum, Austin, TX

37. Thelma Catherine "Pat" Ryan Nixon (1912-1993)

Few First Ladies have overcome more on the road to the White House, or lived a life in the public spotlight that was so emotionally disturbing. Born Thelma Ryan in Ely, Nevada, "Pat" lost her mother when she was 13. She nursed her father for two years until his death in 1929. Steadfast courage and determination were to be hallmarks of Pat Ryan, who met her future husband at a community theater in Whittier, California, where they both appeared in the same play. The Nixons were married in June 1940. After World War II, Pat joined Dick on the campaign trail. She lost her taste for politics during the 1952 Vice Presidential

campaign when questions were raised about their family finances. Yet she was at Nixon's side eight years later when he lost a narrow race to John F. Kennedy, and again in 1968, when he staged his historic comeback. In the White House, Mrs. Nixon devoted four or five hours each day to her mail, insisting on signing each letter personally and siding in her quiet way on behalf of those she called "the little guys" against "the big shots." She welcomed record numbers of visitors to the White House, and redecorated nine of its rooms. She also hosted entertainers ranging from rock musicians to Shakespearian actors. "I do or die," she once explained, “I never cancel out." Such resolve served the First Lady well during the time of trial following Watergate. When her husband resigned the Presidency in August 1974, the 62-year-old Pat Nixon had some parting advice for Gerald and Betty Ford. Spotting the red carpet that had been rolled out to a waiting helicopter, Mrs. Nixon said, "You'll see so many of those . . . you'll get so you hate them." To the end, she remained unaffected, if often unappreciated by the Washington press corps. In retirement, she kept a low profile, enjoyed her grandchildren, and savored the privacy she was denied her for most of her adult life.

Gown, Alfred Bosand, ca. 1970, sequins and pearls
Courtesy of Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum and the Richard Nixon Foundation, Yorba Linda, CA

Her favorite dress. “I always felt good in this dress.” – Pat Nixon

38. Elizabeth "Betty" Bloomer Ford (1918-2011)

Betty Bloomer was a dancer who studied with Martha Graham before taking a job in Grand Rapids, Michigan, as head fashion coordinator at Herpolsheimer's Department Store. Three weeks after marriage to Gerald Ford in October 1948, she was also a political wife, married to a freshman Congressman and bound for Washington, where she would spend more than a quarter century. This Cub Scout den mother who taught Sunday school and was noted in an early Washington Post profile for her taste in "quiet suits" and "slightly more talkative hats," became one of the nation's most outspoken First Ladies. Candor was in fashion in 1974, and the 56-year-old Betty Ford earned widespread popularity for honestly dealing with changes in women's lives. Recalling her own mastectomy in her autobiography, she also discussed the impact a First Lady can have, "Lying in the hospital, thinking of all those women going for cancer checkups because of me, I'd come to realize more clearly the power of the woman in the White House. Not my power, but the power of the position, a power which could be used to help." Mrs. Ford employed her power on behalf of the Equal Rights Amendment and the International Women's Year. In later years, she was equally open in discussing her fight against alcoholism and drug dependency. By 1976, buttons sprouted across the political landscape reading, "Betty's Husband for President." Through his own relaxed attitude toward such independence, and with the help of a photogenic

family, President Ford did much to close a substantial gap in the polls and almost win a full term in his own right. After leaving Washington, Mrs. Ford devoted her time to the Betty Ford Center at the Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage, California. She wrote two books, one of which was made into a television movie.

Gown, worn to the State Dinner for President Valery Giscard d'Estang of France, Luis Estevez, 1976, chiffon
Courtesy of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum, Grand Rapids, Michigan

39. Rosalynn Smith Carter (Born 1927)

This "First Lady from Plains" was the first of four children. Despite helping her mother with housekeeping and caring for her younger siblings following the 1940 death of her father, Rosalynn Smith graduated from Georgia Southwestern College. Soon after, she married her Plains neighbor and childhood sweetheart, James Earl Carter, Jr. Their first home was Norfolk, Virginia, where Ensign Carter was stationed. In 1953, they were back in Plains, where both Carters worked in the family business and fought racial segregation in local schools. Rosalynn proved a skillful and popular campaigner when her husband sought a seat in Georgia's Senate and later, Georgia's governorship. She became a national figure in 1976, etching a memorable picture striding down Pennsylvania Avenue holding her husband's hand on Inauguration Day, 1977. In the next four years, Mrs. Carter proved to be tireless. In her early 50s, she traveled extensively and effectively as an official representative of the United States in Latin America. She had her own office in the East Wing, sometimes attended Cabinet meetings, and served as perhaps the President's closest adviser. Continuing her long-held interest in mental health, she served as Honorary Chairperson of a Presidential commission on the subject, and became only the second First Lady in history, Eleanor Roosevelt being the first, to testify before a congressional committee. Other causes she promoted included ERA, volunteerism, and the rights of aged Americans. In many ways, Rosalynn's activism paralleled that of Eleanor Roosevelt. Like Mrs. Roosevelt, she cared less for her daily wardrobe than her overall impact on behalf of society's victims and those whose voice might not otherwise be heard. Since leaving Washington in 1981, Mrs. Carter wrote a best-selling autobiography, collaborated with her husband on a second book, and is active in Atlanta's Carter Presidential Center. A poll of historians placed her third behind Eleanor Roosevelt and Lady Bird Johnson among 20th century First Ladies, confirming her father's opinion of young Rosalynn, "He thought I could do anything."

Ensemble (skirt, blouse, shirt, belt), worn for White House concert (Rostropovich), 1978, synthetic cloth
Courtesy of the Jimmy Carter Library & Museum

40. Nancy Davis Reagan (Born 1923)

Born Anne Frances Robbins in New York City, the future Nancy Reagan was adopted by her mother's second husband, a Chicago neurosurgeon named Loyal Davis. A Smith College theater major, Nancy went on to a seven-year movie career, which ended only after her 1952 marriage to fellow actor Ronald Reagan. Perhaps because of her own unsettled childhood, Mrs. Reagan devoted herself to husband and family to a degree unusual in Hollywood. When he entered politics as a candidate for governor of California in 1966, Nancy was at his side. Fifteen years later while in her late 50s, she became the First Lady, receiving over 4,000 letters a week but also facing controversy for her interest in clothes and China. In a clever skit at the 1982 Gridiron Dinner, Mrs. Reagan mocked herself with a wacky rendition of "Second Hand Rose." Her subsequent campaign to fight drugs among young people added substance to her public image. In 1985, she hosted 17 First Ladies from around the world in an unprecedented gathering to discuss drug and alcohol abuse.

She appeared in a music video, another first, and held her own private meeting with Pope John II. Mrs. Reagan was a key adviser to her husband throughout his Presidency. Much of the concern she felt for his well-being stemmed from anxiety following the assassination attempt on the President in March 1981 and his cancer surgery four years later. Ironically, the First Lady herself underwent surgery for breast cancer in 1986. At the time, President Reagan paid tribute to America's First Ladies in a radio speech: "Abigail Adams helped invent America," he declared. "Dolley Madison helped protect it. Eleanor Roosevelt was FDR's eyes and ears ... Nancy is my everything." Since leaving Washington in 1989, Mrs. Reagan has remained active in the anti-drug cause. She has written a best-selling memoir, *My Turn*, and is involved in the Reagan Presidential Library.

Day Dress, Bill Blass, worn to a “Just Say No” event with the NBA, ca. 1980s, wool
Courtesy of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library-Museum, Simi Valley, CA
“Just Say No” basketball, autographed by the NBA Detroit Pistons ca. 1980s
Courtesy of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library-Museum, Simi Valley, CA
“Just Say No” button, worn to a “Just Say No” event with the NBA, ca. 1980s
Courtesy of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library-Museum, Simi Valley, CA
“Just Say No” headband, worn to a “Just Say No” event with the NBA, ca. 1980s
Courtesy of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library-Museum, Simi Valley, CA

41. Barbara Pierce Bush (Born 1925)

Barbara Pierce, daughter of a New York publishing executive, Barbara Pierce left Smith College in 1945 to marry a returning G.l. named George Herbert Walker Bush. At Yale he played baseball while a very pregnant Mrs. Bush sat behind home plate, protected by a high

wire fence. Tragedy struck the family in 1953 when their four-year-old daughter, Robin, died of leukemia. The Bushes' other children include one daughter and four sons. In their years together, George and Barbara have moved at least 44 times. Through it all, Mrs. Bush has combined a very traditional devotion to family with a refreshing spontaneity and humor rare in a political wife. The same qualities have made her one of America's most popular First Ladies. With her trademark faux pearls and the gray hair she refuses to color, she mocks her own appearance, telling a reporter for Ladies Home Journal, "One of the myths is that I don't dress well. I dress very well, I just don't look so good." Since leaving the White House, Barbara has led an active life of working on social concerns. She serves on the boards of Americares and the Mayo Clinics, and she heads the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy.

Suit, worn reading to children ca. 1990s
Courtesy George Bush Library
Photo, Barbara Bush reading to children ca. 1990s
Courtesy George Bush Library

42. Hillary Rodham Clinton (1994-2001)

Hillary Rodham Clinton served as the 67th Secretary of State of the United States from January 21, 2009 until February 1, 2013, after nearly four decades in public service as an advocate, attorney, First Lady, and Senator. As First Lady, Hillary Clinton advocated for health care reform and led successful bipartisan efforts to improve the adoption and foster care systems, reduce teen pregnancy, and provide health care to millions of children through the Children's Health Insurance Program. She also traveled to more than 80 countries as a representative of our country, winning respect as a champion of human rights, democracy, civil society, and opportunities for women and girls around the world. In 2000, Clinton made history as the first First Lady elected to the United States Senate. She worked across party lines to expand economic opportunity and access to quality, affordable health care, including for wounded service members, veterans and members of the National Guard and Reserves. After September 11, 2001, she advocated for rebuilding New York and addressing the health needs of first responders who risked their lives at Ground Zero. In 2007 and 2008, Clinton made her historic campaign for President, winning 18 million votes, and more primaries and delegates than any woman had before. In her four years as Secretary of State, Clinton played a central role in restoring America's standing in the world and strengthening its global leadership. Her "smart power" approach to foreign policy elevated American diplomacy and development and repositioned them for the 21st century -- with new tools, technologies, and partners, including the private sector and civil society around the world. As America's chief diplomat and the President's principal foreign policy adviser, Clinton spearheaded progress on many of our greatest national security challenges, from reasserting the United States as a Pacific power to imposing crippling

sanctions on Iran and North Korea to responding to the challenges and opportunities of the Arab Awakening to negotiating a ceasefire in the Middle East. She pushed the frontiers of human rights and demonstrated that giving women the opportunity to participate fully is vital to security, stability, and prosperity.

Skirt suit, worn to Nelson Mandela's Inauguration, May 10, 1994, acetate/poly crepe
Courtesy of Hillary Rodham Clinton
Hat, worn to Nelson Mandela's Inauguration, May 10, 1994
Courtesy of Hillary Rodham Clinton

43. Laura Welch Bush (Born November 1946)

Laura grew up in Texas and completed her Bachelor of Science in education from Southern Methodist University. She went on to the University of Texas and received a degree in library science. She taught public school and was a school librarian. After the births of her children, Laura dedicated herself to her family. Laura was not particularly vocal on political issues, but she worked tirelessly on literacy, health care, human rights, education, and family issues when she was the First Lady of Texas and of the United States. She is widely recognized for her work raising awareness for women's heart health and promoting childhood literacy. Laura was First Lady when the terrorist attacks of 9/11 took place. She spoke about comforting children and providing assistance to the families affected by the tragedy. In 2001, Laura began speaking about the suffering of women and children under the Taliban regime on the weekly presidential address. In 2005, she visited Afghanistan to express American support for the country's new democratic government, which would support women and children. Laura loves the outdoors and serves as the Honorary Chair of the National Park Foundation. She works to promote the Junior Ranger program; she believes the program instills children with a love of the national park system. Additionally, she helped launch Preserve America, a national program that supports America's heritage and cultural resources. Since leaving the White House, she has written Spoken From the Heart, an autobiographical account of her time as the First Lady. She also supports an active literacy program at the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum and continues her work with various organizations.

Skirt suit Carolina Herrera velvet and silk, 2005
Courtesy of the George W. Bush Presidential Library & Museum

44. Michelle Robinson Obama (Born January 1964)

Michelle Robinson was born in Chicago and excelled at school. Although her family was of low income, she went on to Princeton University where she studied sociology and African-American studies. After attending Princeton, she went on to Harvard Law School. After graduation, she began working at the Chicago law firm Sidley & Austin, where she

met her future husband, Barack Obama. Michelle and Barack shared many values and were dedicated to community. She is very dedicated to her daughters, Sasha and Malia. Michelle worked in several community-based programs throughout her career and served as the Associate Dean of Student Services at the University of Chicago in 1996. In her time as the dean, volunteerism increased greatly at the school. The current First Lady works with the Partnership for Healthier America and started the program Let's Move! She is dedicated to eradicating childhood obesity within the current generation. As our nation's first African-American First Lady, she devotes her time to positive social change such as assisting military families, encouraging women's leadership, promoting the arts, and supporting education.

Skirt suit Zac Posen Knit, 2012
Courtesy of Michelle Obama